

”SOMETIMES I JUST WANT TO SHOW HOW  
PRETTY SANDWICH I MADE”

—

THE SELF-PRESENTATION HABITS OF  
FACEBOOK USERS

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The objectives of this thesis were to study the self-presentation habits of Facebook users, and to assess how conscious of these habits the users are. In addition, the effect of other Facebook users on the self-presentation process of an individual user was studied. The empirical data for this study was collected via an online survey. The survey was distributed through Facebook in February 2017 and it received a total of 84 responses. The majority of the respondents were from Finland, and among 25-44 years of age. The quantitative data was analyzed by examining the answer percentages and averages, and qualitative data by content analysis. For the data analysis, the ideas of symbolic interactionism were applied.

As a key finding, the results of this study indicated that self-presentation on Facebook is a conscious action and that people spend time controlling their Facebook presence. Most of the actions are performed on purpose, and the respondents of the survey had clear ideas of the actions they want and do not want to execute on Facebook. The results also suggest that it is important to present oneself in a favorable way and that the users are trying to idealize the presentation of self. Clearly, the respondents neither want to look bad or feel embarrassed on Facebook. They also described how they tend to leave things out because they do not want to be associated with certain subjects, matters or people.

The influence of other users was clearly noticed, and was indicated to have both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, the posts made by other users were not appreciated if they presented the affected user in an undesirable way. On the other hand, the posts made by other users made the respondents feel happy and a sense of belonging to a group. Other Facebook users are perceived as an audience, and the respondents paid more attention to the content they post depending on who the recipients are. Friend requests were also thoroughly thought before accepting them, implying that the respondents do not want to associate with complete strangers or certain individuals.

Keywords: Facebook, self-presentation, social media, symbolic interactionism, impression management

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

In its early days, Internet was mainly used for seeking information, but over the years the Internet culture has changed. Instead of being just an unlimited pool of information for its users to explore, we are now experiencing a new and more social version of the Internet. It is all about user-created content, and various online services and websites allow people to contribute in different ways. Social media sites and applications are examples of these kinds of services, and they have gained a lot of success in a relatively short period of time. Nowadays, there is a wide variety of different services to choose from: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and more, and new applications and platforms are being created all the time.

Social media is obviously, or at least ostensibly, also about being social. In order to be social you also have to present yourself somehow, usually by creating some sort of user page. Facebook, for example, makes its users to create a mandatory personal profile page and this page is also used as a way to communicate and share information with other users. Through these profile pages, the users of Facebook showcase a variety of information about themselves. It is possible to present your relationship status, post pictures, indicate what kind of music or movies you like, or which political party you support. It is up to the user how much they are willing to share – Facebook just offers the platform. Combined, all these little pieces of information create a whole: the overall image of who you are. This leads to an interesting question: what information are people actually sharing and why?

The overall aim of this thesis is to find out if self-presentation on Facebook is a conscious action and what is the importance of it. Social media sites and applications are more and more present in people's lives as we speak. According to Pew Research Center (2016) 79% of all Internet users were using Facebook in November 2016. I chose Facebook as the target of this research since it is the social media that I personally tend to use the most and also because it is something that is constantly present in people's lives. Facebook is used for messaging, sharing information, party invitations and many other things. Stenros and associates (2011) refer to the use of Facebook as an "ubiquitous part of contemporary life". It has become such a "normal" part of everyday life that it might not even be considered as a separate action anymore: it is like talking on the phone (Stenros et al., 2011).

The subject of online self-presentation has been a quite popular research topic and probably will continue to be one. However, as the Internet as a medium is constantly changing, it feels justifiable to try to find out how the online self-presentation is experienced at the end of the 2010s. As Stenros and associates (2011) state: we have become so entangled with the social media that it is almost impossible to think life without it. For example, people are using their social media profiles when applying for jobs or as a part of their electoral campaigns. Because of all this, I find it interesting to see how the users of social media are currently evaluating their own performance: are they consciously aware of the effects of their actions or not?

Nancy Thumim (2012) says that even though Facebook claims to be a service for socializing with others and not for presenting yourself, in order to be able to socialize the users are forced to represent themselves. She describes the self-presentation process as a “condition of participation” to the service. Basically, Thumim (2012) is stating that because the self-presentation process is sort of a ubiquitous part of Facebook, people do not think of it as such and are not consciously paying attention to their actions.

Thumim (2012, 138) claims that: “on Facebook self-representation becomes both inadvertent and banal”, meaning that on Facebook people are not careful about how they act online. The public opinion also among the participants of my thesis seminar seemed to be that people are not thinking how their Facebook performance will make them look. If I think about my own Facebook performance, I do not quite agree with this opinion. I am personally very careful about how I present myself through different Facebook actions and I also like to monitor what other people post about me. Because of this, in addition of Facebook users’ own actions, this thesis also aims to find out what is the role of other users of the service to the self-presentation process of an individual user.

In his book *Identity Problems in the Facebook Era*, Daniel Trottier (2014) presents a concept of digital stigmatization, by which he refers to a situation where someone’s private and sensitive information comes public through online platforms like Facebook and results in negative consequences to that person’s reputation. An example of this could be a situation where an undesirable picture of a person is published without permission. These kinds of actions often take place on Facebook where people post

things about other people all the time but do not necessarily ask permissions prior to posting.

The opinions about the consciousness and awareness of the self-presentation habits of Facebook users seem to vary quite a lot and this thesis aims to find out how the users themselves are experiencing these things.

This thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 consists of a literature review, while Chapter 3 presents the research questions and the methodology used in the present study. Chapter 4 reports the empirical findings. Chapter 5 discusses the results, evaluates their value and reflects on the needs for further research.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis concentrates on people's self-presentation habits on social media and particularly on Facebook. In this chapter the term social media and how it is understood in this thesis is defined. This chapter also looks at the history of self-presentation and how it is experienced in the online environments, particularly on Facebook, and how Facebook works as a forum for self-disclosure.

### 2.1 What is social media?

If you would ask people on the street that what do they consider as "social media" the answer would probably involve something referring to Facebook, Twitter or other similar applications. But what actually is *social media*? According to Safko (2010), social media "is the media we use to be social." Safko (2010) then further clarifies the term by explaining how the word social refers to people's needs to be in contact with other people and find a group where they can share thoughts and ideas and also feel comfortable at the same time. The word media then again refers to the things people use to form those connections with each other. Safko (2010) also says that the used media can be any technology that is available: starting from drums and ending to online applications.

Safko's (2010) definition is simple but at the same time quite broad. It does not really specify the term but could instead be attached to something that probably would not be considered as a part of social media in 2010s. As the World Wide Web seems to be an ever-changing platform, social media has also changed over time. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 61) defined social media as:

"a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."

In their definition, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) refer to Web 2.0 as a new way of using the web. Items, like personal homepages, where one user was publishing things for others to read, are being replaced by more collaborative systems like wikis and blogs.

While the Web 2.0 offers the technological background for social media sites and applications, the *user generated content* is what makes it social. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 61) say that the term is “usually applied to describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users”.

Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) definition of the term social media is basically saying that social media is a group of internet-based applications where all the users can participate in the creation and sharing of the content. Social network sites can be included in those applications.

Boyd and Ellison (2007, 211) define social network sites as:

“web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.”

On social network sites the users create a profile and then use that profile to connect with other people. The features of these profiles pages vary between different services but typically include at least a picture and some sort of basic information about the user. Usually, there also exists some sort of free-form section (known as the user’s “feed”) through which the user can post text or photographs. Depending on the service there can also be additional information on, for example, what kind of music or movies the user likes or which political party the user supports. The visibility of all this information can be limited to within the user’s personal friends list or be public to all the users of the service.

Although Boyd and Ellison (2007) talk about the use of the terms *social networking sites* vs. *social network sites*, they prefer the use of *social network sites* since the primary idea of the social network sites is not to network with new people but rather to stay in touch with the ones you already know. Cirucci (2013, 48) adds to this definition by saying that social media provides a space to make “visible social interactions between people who most likely already know each other offline”. This is not entirely true if we look at social network sites in general. Twitter, for example, is a place where the users commonly interact also with people they do not know. Similarly, on Instagram and Snapchat it is common to follow users that you don’t actually know. In case of



Facebook, however, the statement remains mostly true as also noted in other research (e.g. Stenros et. al, 2011).

In the 2010s, as social network sites are increasingly being used also for networking and not just to connect with the already existing friends, the term *social networking sites* could also be used. However, the word *sites* is something that could be replaced with something else. Saari (2010) regards the use of the word *sites* as somewhat old-fashioned since it refers only to websites. The use of social media mobile applications is increasing all the time and, for example, Snapchat is not even available for use via a regular Internet browser. Saari (2010) uses the term *social network services* while reviewing social media sites and applications and in this thesis the term *social network services* will also be used.

## **2.2 Online self-presentation**

Finding one's identity is a key part of an individual's personality: who am I, and how will I behave? Self-presentation of humans is definitely not a new research topic, and this chapter will review the history of self-presentation habits from offline to online contexts.

One of the best-known studies on the topic of self-presentation is Goffman's (1959) book *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman describes the self-presentation as a performance, sort of like being a part of a play. He also states that people have a tendency to alter their performance depending on the current audience. (Goffman, 1959)

The presentation of self, however, seems to be a very different experience, depending on whether you meet someone face-to-face or on the Internet. Poster (1990) described already in the 1990s how the messaging via computers replaces face-to-face conversations and how these conversations have the ability to offer people a new form of self-presentation. Turkle (1995) also discusses how people can use Internet to construct multiple identities. In the past, people tended to reflect themselves through the eyes of their families and other people close by, and the presentation of self was quite limited. Nowadays, this is not the case anymore and identity can be thought more as "a set of roles that can be mixed and matched" (Turkle 1995, 179). Internet serves as a set

up for this kind of experimentation of self. (Turkle 1995) The idea of the idealization of self was presented also by Goffman (1959), so it is not a new notion in the non-virtual context either – the virtual world just has the ability to make it more flexible. The Internet in its current form can be described as sort of an identity playground. In this setting, self-presentation is not as limited as in the non-virtual context: people have more options regarding how they want to present themselves, and do change their presentation at will depending on context.

Poster (1990, 116) presented four effects that online messaging will have on people:

- 1) “introduce new possibilities of playing with identities”
- 2) “degender communications by removing gender cues”
- 3) “destabilize existing hierarchies in relationships and rehierarchy communications according to criteria that were previously irrelevant”
- 4) “disperse the subject, dislocating it temporally and spatially”

Although Poster’s (1990) findings may not be totally relevant anymore, they nevertheless display the core idea of why people have (sometimes multiple) profiles on various social network services: it is easier to be who you want to be. Hsueh-Hua Chen and Duh (2009) noted that one of the key reasons people like to continue to participate in online communities is because they like the idea of presenting an ideal picture of who they are to others. Similarly, people interviewed by Turkle (1995, 179) said that they feel “more like who they want to be” when chatting online.

### **2.2.1 Anonymity vs. real identity in an online context**

When people meet offline, they are able to pick up some information from one another; like gender, age and other visible features even if they do not really know each other. In an online environment, these cues are not available, and people have the opportunity to create themselves a new identity. There are three levels of identity to choose from: anonymity, pseudonymity and using your real identity. (Donath, 2004)

Anonymity in an online self-presentation means that the users do not give any identifiable information about themselves. Pseudonymity in the same context means that a user chooses an alias and uses that when communicating. Compared to total anonymity, the use of a pseudonym can still identify activity to certain source without revealing the real identity of the person behind it (Scott & Bonito, 2006).

### **2.2.2 Anonymity in current social network services**

In the early era of the Internet anonymity was highly present. The users on the bulletin boards and chat rooms chose a username and often pretended to be someone else than they actually were. There were very few rules and restrictions in terms of self-presentation in the early social web. (Lovink, 2011) On the current social network services like Facebook, people are mostly present with their real names and photographs, although the audience is then often limited to a selected group of friends only. One exception to this is Twitter where almost everything that is posted is public.

Poster (1990) also draws attention to the importance of anonymity in online messaging but the amount and complexity of online self-presentation has changed over time. The platforms available for online communication in the 1990s were services like e-mail or discussion boards, merely offering simple options for self-disclosure (Poster, 1990). In comparison, modern day social network services like Facebook offer a variety of tools for presenting the wanted image.

The option of anonymity or pseudonymity was, and still is, a tool for maintaining online privacy and for keeping the user's personal information safe. It could easily be assumed that the use of one's real identity would lead to an increased amount of privacy issues. However, the research has shown that people who use their real identity on social network services are often more careful with the information they present (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). The anonymity often makes people to be more talkative (Poster, 1990). The illusion of privacy in anonymous and pseudonymous communication may actually lead to users unintentionally revealing more than they intended to. It has been shown that it is possible to pick up personalizing information from a piece of text written under a pseudonym. (Yates et al., 2010)

## **2.3 Facebook as a forum of disclosure**

Facebook is a social network service that was founded by Mark Zuckerberg and his associates in 2004. It was originally targeted only for college students in the United States, but then it gradually grew larger and in 2006 opened up for anyone to join. In December 2016 Facebook had 1.23 billion daily active users and approximately 85% of these users are from outside of US & Canada. (Facebook, 2017) As on the other social network services, Facebook users create a profile that they use to communicate with other users.

Compared to earlier online social network services, like chat rooms, Facebook is not a place to meet new people but rather to stay in touch with the people you already know (Stenros et al., 2011). The participants in the above study indicated that they are rather selective of whom they want to be friends with on Facebook. People from different social circles may have varying expectations of how the user will behave (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). On one hand, this is also an important aspect in the overall presentation of self on Facebook since accepting someone as a friend can limit the desire to discuss certain things. On the other hand, accepting someone might also affect the preferred image of self by displaying to others with whom the user is friends with (Stenros et al., 2011).

### **2.3.1 The elements of self-presentation on Facebook**

Facebook is at the same time being public and private. (Stenros et al., 2011). In addition to the things that are visible on the user's profile page, there is an option to connect with people privately through the chat window. The private messages are obviously also a one way of self-presentation: it just affects a smaller audience.

Every Facebook user has a personal News Feed page that displays the content posted by their friends. It is also the page that the content of which people mainly use when forming their impressions on the people on their friend list. When looking at the News Feed page, the most visible items are the status updates, pictures and shared content like links and videos from secondary sources. There are other features that also matter but might not get so much attention, such as the liked pages, the events attended, games

played, and also who are you friends with. All these other features are better displayed on the user's individual profile page.

### **2.3.2 Searching the perfect combination**

Social network services are places for people to “construct a public persona” (Stenros et al., 2011, 154). Stenros and associates (2011) characterize the properties of “giving good face” on Facebook. The participants in their study were not that willing to admit that they are playing a certain role, but they did agree that they are always trying to make the best possible impression. This can be done, for example, by posting only photos that are flattering to the subject or by joining certain groups. (Stenros et al., 2011)

The features that Facebook offers for self-presentation are gradually changing. In 2011, Facebook launched its new Timeline that replaced the old profile pages (Facebook, 2017). This change forced all the users to a more uniform way of self-presentation by displaying all the information they have ever posted on the site and by making the profile page more structured than before. With these kind of changes, the available social network services are trying to make people have only one, transparent online identity, probably in order to offer potential advertisers the best possible information (Van Dijck, 2013). The users, however, always seem to find a way to adjust and use the offered features for their own purposes (Van Dijck, 2013).

Lovink (2011) connects these Facebook changes to the 9/11 attacks and other terrorism incidents. After the incidents, there was an upsurge of global web surveillance, removing the previously owned sense of freedom from online self-presentation. This resulted in the development of social media services such as Facebook that are strictly controlled and maintained: places where “ordinary users can meet their friends and be protected from the wild, anarchic Web” (Lovink, 2011, 40). According to Lovink (2011), this results in a loss of freedom to present oneself in multiple ways on the Internet. The controlled social media forces people into one, united identity.

### **2.3.3 Self-presentation vs. self-promotion**

Together with the carefully managed self-presentation the social network services also offer a tool for self-promotion. Sociologist Eva Illouz (as cited by Lovink, 2011) points out that the growth of social media sites and the demand for more transparency has made it harder to separate the private and professional self. The society has changed from self-presentation to self-promotion; something that celebrities have already dealt with for a long time. People have the need to present the best possible image of themselves in order to survive in the competitive environment. To achieve this, people are forced to dismiss the negative aspects, focus on the positive and hide the so-called real self under all this positivity.

Self-promotion on Facebook is obviously something that celebrities, politicians, and corporate entities engage in, but it is starting to be more common also for the “normal” Facebook users. Teenagers, for example, are spending a lot of time on social media to become more popular among their friends. Employers are also starting to use Facebook as a tool to screen potential employees, making it even more important for people to display the wanted image. (Van Dijck, 2013)

Cirucci (2013, 47) believes that similarly to video games, “the end goal of Facebook is also to become a hero”. People are becoming paparazzi who stalk themselves and publish about their own lives. By these actions they are trying to create a celebrity-like status for themselves, with their online friends acting as the fans who follow their lives. This, however, only occurs within the service boundaries and is not visible outside of Facebook. (Cirucci, 2013)

### **2.3.4 Keeping up the appearances**

The creation of the “perfect” online self seems to have become more and more important. Mashable (2015) claims that in order to gain a perfect photo to be published on social media, we forget to actually experience the situation itself. People are willing to even risk their own safety in order to capture a perfect moment.

The impression management also seems to get harder as the social media services develop. While on the earlier chat rooms and discussion forums all the published

information was presented by the user itself, the social networking services now allow other people to publish information about other users as well. (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). This way, other people can construct a part of the users' online persona on social network services. Facebook, for example, lets other users to tag you in their photos and make public posts to your personal wall. The tagging can be controlled, but the wall posts are harder to monitor. Identity on Facebook is created through the amount of self-disclosure, i.e., how much and what kind of information are you willing to post. The features offered by the site limit the possibilities, but the option of other people to contribute makes the process harder to control.

Trottier (2014) points out how people are posting online without thinking about the possible consequences. Social network services are designed to make the shared information publicly available. While posting, people don't think about the possibility of the information spreading from one platform to another, nor do they think about how other people can influence their carefully constructed identity. Even the lives of people who don't have their own Facebook profiles can end up online for everyone to view through someone else's photos and stories.

Trottier (2014) illustrates the digital stigmatization through social media in different stages of life. He points out how a person can have an extensive presence even before they are able to contribute to it by themselves: parents often post photos and videos of their children on their own profiles. This kind of undesirable and possible harmful information can also be posted by anyone else who uses these services. Life events like going to college or having a relationship can also produce certain type of material for the construction of one's online persona.

### **3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents the research questions that this thesis attempts to answer. The methodology used in empirical data collection and analysis is also introduced.

#### **3.1 Research questions**

The objectives of this thesis are to study the self-presentation habits of Facebook users, and to find out how conscious of these habits the users are. In addition to Facebook users' own actions, this thesis also aims to assess the role of other Facebook users in the self-presentation process of an individual user.

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 provided useful background information when considering the key aspects of the online self-presentation phenomena. Goffman's (1959) ideas serve as a basis for the understanding of the phenomena of self-presentation. Poster's (1990) book summarized the overall aspects of early online self-presentation habits and Lovink's study (2011) presents a modern take on the matter. The study conducted by Stenros and associates (2011) was especially useful for assessing the Facebook self-presentation process. Trottier's (2014) book concentrates on the negative aspects of Facebook self-presentation, and will be profoundly used in analysis of the survey results.

The empirical research for this thesis was not connected to any specific model. The conceptual framework of this research is based on a combination of the studies presented on Chapter 2. The previous studies provided ideas for the identification and specification of the research questions. These studies were also helpful for survey questionnaire design. Moreover, prior study findings were used to evaluate the novelty value of the empirical research results.



Drawing on the above framework, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. Can self-presentation on Facebook be considered as a conscious action?
2. In which ways do people present themselves to others on Facebook?
3. Do other Facebook users somehow influence the self-presentation process of an individual user?

### **3.2 Survey as a research method**

The data for this master's thesis research was collected by an online survey. Doing interviews was also considered as a possible option but in the end it seemed that conducting a survey would be more efficient and would provide suitable data for the analysis.

“A survey is a system for collecting information.” (Sue & Ritter, 2012, 3) When designing a survey, the researcher should not concentrate solely on the questions but rather to see the process as a whole. By doing this, the researchers can be more confident that they get results that are useful for their research goals and objectives.

Fink (2003, 1) lists seven activities that form the survey process:

“These include setting objectives for information collection, designing the study, preparing a reliable and valid survey instrument, administering the survey, managing and analyzing survey data, and reporting the results.”

In addition to this list, Fink (2003) also states that surveys should always be ethical and have the needed resources in order to be processed correctly.

The development of the Internet and computer-technology has also brought new ways of conducting researches. Surveys that were previously conducted by using pen and paper or face-to-face are now available to be executed via Internet. This new technology can be seen as more efficient but it also has its own problems. Sue and Ritter (2012) state that online surveys are not a research method that would suit all types of research objectives. In the case of this thesis, the online survey, however, seemed to be the most

suitable method for collecting the empirical data. Since the objective of this thesis was to analyze matters that are happening in the online context, it was also natural to have the data collection happening online. It also enabled a wide and efficient distribution of the survey and also added the possibility to get respondents all over the world.

Compared to surveys that are conducted face-to-face it is not as easy to monitor the responses or ask additional questions for example. However, the content on the Internet is available to be dispersed globally within a press of a button so the distribution can be really fast.

Online surveys have, on one hand, been criticized for having low answer rates (Sue & Ritter, 2012). On the other hand, when conducting any survey, online or not, it is important to find the right forum for distributing. As my survey was about Facebook use, it felt natural to distribute it via Facebook. This turned out to be an efficient solution since I got enough responses for the analysis within few days. Compared to the option of making interviews to selected people only, making an online survey that was available for any Facebook user to answer allowed me an access of wider variety of data than the interviews probably would have.

Sue and Ritter (2012) point out that when using social media as a way to distribute a survey, you have to rely on the people's voluntariness to participate; therefore, the subjects cannot be selected randomly. This leads the results from these surveys to have "limited external validity and suffer from the same shortcomings as any other survey relying on a nonprobability sample" (Sue & Ritter, 2012, 121). What Sue and Ritter (2012) mean is that the samples collected via social media can be biased and not a representation of the whole population. This holds true for my study as well: the respondents seem to be very much alike with each other. However, since the objective was to concentrate on Facebook users, I would say that the data is sufficiently valid for the purposes of this thesis. It is likely, that the survey primarily reached people who are active on Facebook. This is also why I intentionally left out any background questions considering the respondents gender or socio-economic status because I personally did not feel it would be an important factor when it comes to understanding people's Facebook behavior.

### **3.3 Planning and conducting the survey**

Google Forms is an online survey making tool that was used as a platform for the survey. It was mainly chosen because it is free and easy to use and modify. I had already used it once before when making a survey for a course, so I was familiar with its features. Google Forms offers ready-made charts based on the collected data, but it also allows the user to export the information to an Excel file.

The questionnaire included a total of 43 items, of which five dealt with background information. There were 25 multiple-choice questions, and 13 items for which the respondents were able to provide a free-form answer. All the multiple-choice questions were mandatory to answer to, but only five of the free-form questions were marked as mandatory. Due to this, some of the questions had a variable number of answers. The questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1.

Before making the survey public, I conducted few test rounds. Sue and Ritter (2012) also indicate that this is an important phase in the survey design process. I tested the survey with people who were already familiar with my research topic and with people who had no idea what the intention of the survey was. Conducting the test rounds was actually useful since I got feedback about the wording of the questions and about the mechanics of the survey. The test rounds also helped me to see if the questions were understood the way I meant them to be and if I got the types of answers that I actually was hoping to get.

The survey was distributed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2017 via Facebook. I made a public post using my personal profile and asked people to answer the survey and to share the post with their friends. A total of 18 people shared the post through their personal profile pages. The invitation message is presented in Figure 1.



**Terhi Rantasalo**

February 2 · 🌐 ▼

Hi! As a part of my Master's thesis, I'm conducting a survey about Facebook users self-presentation habits and I need your help! Please come and answer my survey from the link below. The questions are in English and it will take approximately 15 minutes to answer. All the answers are handled anonymously. I will highly appreciate all the answers that I will get and I would also appreciate if you share this link with your friends and acquaintances. Thank you all in advance!

Ja sama suomeksi, eli toteutan osana gradua kyselyn Facebookin käyttäjien tavoista esittää itseään, ja tarvitsen siihen vastaajia. Kysely löytyy alla olevasta linkistä ja sen täyttämiseen menee n. 15 minuuttia. Kaikki vastaukset käsitellään anonyymisti. Kysymykset ovat englanniksi, mutta voit tarvittaessa vastata myös suomeksi, jos tuntuu että tulet paremmin ymmärretyksi. Arvostan suuresti kaikkia vastauksia ja arvostan myös jos jaat tätä eteenpäin kavereille ja tutuille. Kiitos kaikille jo etukäteen!



Figure 1. The Facebook post to promote the survey.

The survey started rapidly receiving responses after the promotion post was published. Most of the answers were received during the first 24 hours and after the survey had been online three days, it had received a total of 84 answers. I kept the survey open a week after that, but it did not receive any additional responses. This is probably due to Facebook posts only get attention for a relatively short period of time before they are replaced with newer posts. Moreover, it is likely that no one is actively looking into

anyone else's old Facebook posts. I decided that 84 answers would provide a sufficient amount of data for my study; therefore I closed the survey on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The survey provided a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. For analysis, the basic assumptions from sociological theory called symbolic interactionism, and especially the ideas of Erving Goffman and his theory of impression management, were applied. In addition, Daniel Trottier's (2014) take on Goffman's (1959) work in the field of symbolic interactionism was used. Symbolic interactionism, and Goffman's and Trottier's (2014) theories are briefly introduced in the following paragraphs.

#### **3.4.1 Symbolic interactionism**

The theory of symbolic interactionism focuses on the interactions between humans and the meanings implicated on those interactions (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013). One of the key assumptions in symbolic interactionism is that people are capable of reflecting their own behavior, and because of that, they have the ability to shape their interactions. Symbolic interactionism assumes that people have purposes for their actions, and they act accordingly to the given situation. While people have this autonomy to decide how they want to act, there are many external constraints that limit the possibilities. (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013)

The concept of self is one of the key concepts in symbolic interactionism. Sociologist Herbert Blumer's definition of self says that "people can be the objects of their own actions", meaning that people do not only act towards others but they also act towards themselves (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013, p. 143). Because of this, people are able to act consciously instead of just instantly reacting to some outside stimulus. They interpret things and their meaning to them and then choose a way to act accordingly in that specific situation. (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013)

Erving Goffman, a sociologist and probably the best-known contributor in the field of symbolic interactionism, coined the term of impression management. Impression management is an action oriented to prevent unexpected and possibly harmful events in the process of self-presentation. Goffman (1959) believed that people are constantly intentionally putting on a show and change these shows in order to accomplish the perfect self-impression. Goffman presented various methods in order to deal with the possible problems in impression management: for example choosing a good audience or determining beforehand how the performance will go.

The symbolic interactionism and Goffman's theory ties into the topic of this thesis because it aims to expose what makes people to perform the choices they make in order to present themselves online. Facebook as a platform works as the external constraint and the other users as the target of interactions.

Even though Internet and social media were nonexistent at the time when Goffman (1959) presented his impression management theory, it is still applicable to the actions in an online environment, instead of face-to-face interactions. Goffman's ideas will be used in the evaluation of the gathered data.

### **3.4.2 Trottier's (2014) take on Goffman's (1959) theory**

In his book, *Identity Problems in the Facebook Era*, Trottier (2014) focuses on how the social media has altered people's self-presentation and what possible problems it causes. Trottier (2014) briefly introduces the history of the social media and user-generated content, from early chat rooms to the modern social network services and from a total anonymity to the era of social convergence where multiple social contexts meet.

Trottier (2014) bases his theory on the work of Goffman (1959), and presents a concept of digital stigmatization that was presented in Chapter 1. As a part of his impression management theory, Goffman (1959) introduced the concept of stigma as something harmful that can affect person's reputation and Trottier (2014) uses this concept as a basis for his own concept of digital stigma. Trottier (2014) says that digital stigmatization should be looked upon as a product of a special era of digital culture.

The idea of digital stigmatization will be applied in analysis of the possible harmful effects of self-presentation on Facebook.

### **3.4.3 Analysis of the survey data**

The analysis of the survey data was conducted in two different ways. Since the survey produced both qualitative and quantitative data, different methods were needed to analyze them.

The survey included 25 multiple-choice questions that provided quantitative data. The style of quantitative questions varied: 14 questions allowed the user to select only one answer, three questions provided the possibility to select more than one answer, and eight questions used the Likert scale from 1-5. The quantitative data was analyzed by extracting the answer percentages, and by calculating the averages for the Likert scale questions.

The survey also included 13 free-form questions for which the respondents could type their own answers, thus providing qualitative data. The *content analysis method* was applied for this data. It is a method that is commonly used when analyzing a qualitative data that is collected via surveys or interviews, for example. Qualitative content analysis aims for “describing the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way”. (Schreier, 2012,1)

In content analysis, a *coding frame* is created to analyze the data. The coding frame is divided into main categories, which are the aspects that the research is focusing on. (Schreier, 2012) For this thesis, the main categories are as follows:

- whether the respondents had acted purposefully
- the reasons and considerations as to why the respondents acted in a certain way
- the respondents’ feelings towards something that happened
- whether the other users were presented as being involved in the action

In addition to these main categories, the subcategories were drawn from the ideas of Goffman (1959) and Trottier (2014).

Goffman (1959) illustrates how people behave differently in different groups and situations. For example, a doctor can be very modest and ordinary when she is seen on the street or in a store, but she can act like a totally different person when she is practicing her occupation. According to Goffman (1959), people try to idealize their behavior in front of others: they want to be seen in a certain manner. Goffman (1959, 26) states:

“If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards. When this inappropriate conduct is itself satisfying in some way, as is often the case, then one commonly finds it indulged in secretly, so that, in a sense, the performer is able to forgo his cake and eat it too.”

Goffman (1959) means that people put on their best presentation when other people are around, but can still secretly maintain some habits that they do not want others to know about. If we reflect this in a context of Facebook, an example could be that someone is actively posting things about healthy lifestyle and clean eating but they actually mostly eat pizza. Or that someone has really strong opinions about political issues and is also actively participating in different political events but on Facebook never shows these things to anyone.

These are the kinds of conscious decisions that people are making when presenting themselves through their Facebook actions: they purposefully leave something out or add something extra. Also, the given audience is an important factor. With Goffman's (1959) thoughts in mind, I paid special attention to the things that the respondents described being intentionally left out or included, and whether the audience was mentioned in some specific way.

As part of the digital stigma process, Trottier (2014) uses the term *spoiled identity*. By that, he means that events that occur on social media can cause harm to the self-presentation process of an individual, affecting their identity, causing the image they have been trying to keep up about themselves, to be spoiled. These events can be caused by the individuals themselves or by other users of the service. In his book, Trottier (2014) lists different events from birth to death that can cause a digital stigma and spoiled identity. These include, for example, posts made by others or posts that the users had made themselves and later regretted. I compared the survey results to Trottier's (2014) ideas, and in this way tried to identify the themes that present the negative and



possibly harmful aspects of the self-presentation process of a Facebook user and also the events that could have turned to a spoiled identity. I used Trottier's (2014) ideas especially when I was trying to identify the answers to the question whether the other users had somehow influenced the self-presentation process of an individual user.

I imported the survey data from Google Forms to Excel and considered at each answer individually. I used color-coding while searching common themes that would fit my coding frame from each answer: the answers that contained similar themes were tagged with same color. For example, the questions regarding the type of content the users had posted or left unposted, I searched the answers for words, like *photos* or *political content*, and then grouped them together. On questions regarding how the respondents felt or reacted, I grouped the answers by emotions, dividing the emotions to positive and negative ones. Happy, flattered, and nice were recognized as positive emotions, and sad, angry, and annoyed were recognized as negative ones. By categorizing the data according to my coding frame, I also acquired numerical answers that I used when reporting the results.

Most of the responses were easy to interpret but some provided data that did not really answer the question. Some of these errors were probably due to the questions being in English, and the respondents mainly being Finnish. There is a possibility that the respondents either did not understand the question or did not know how to deliver their answers in English. I did provide the option to reply in Finnish, but only one of the respondents did that. The answers that did not fit the questions were now common, however. Therefore, I chose to ignore the responses that could not be categorized, since I did not feel that leaving them out would affect the overall results.

When planning the survey questions, I formed them in a way that the answers would be in line with my research questions and the analysis would be easy to conduct. I succeeded in this quite well, as it was easy to pick up certain themes that fit into my coding frame. The respondents provided detailed descriptions of the ways they act and how they feel towards various matters, so the answer categorization was efficient.

## 4 SELF-PRESENTATION HABITS OF FACEBOOK USERS

In this chapter, the results of the survey are presented. The answers are reported by using the thematic division that was used in the questionnaire.

### 4.1 Background information

The survey received a total of 84 responses. It was open for anyone to answer: the only demand was that the respondent had an active Facebook profile.

Most of the respondents, 90,5%, were from Finland and the remaining 9,5% consisted of single respondents from the countries: Iceland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, United Kingdom, Canada, and Denmark.

The number of Facebook friends among the respondents is summarized in Figure 2.

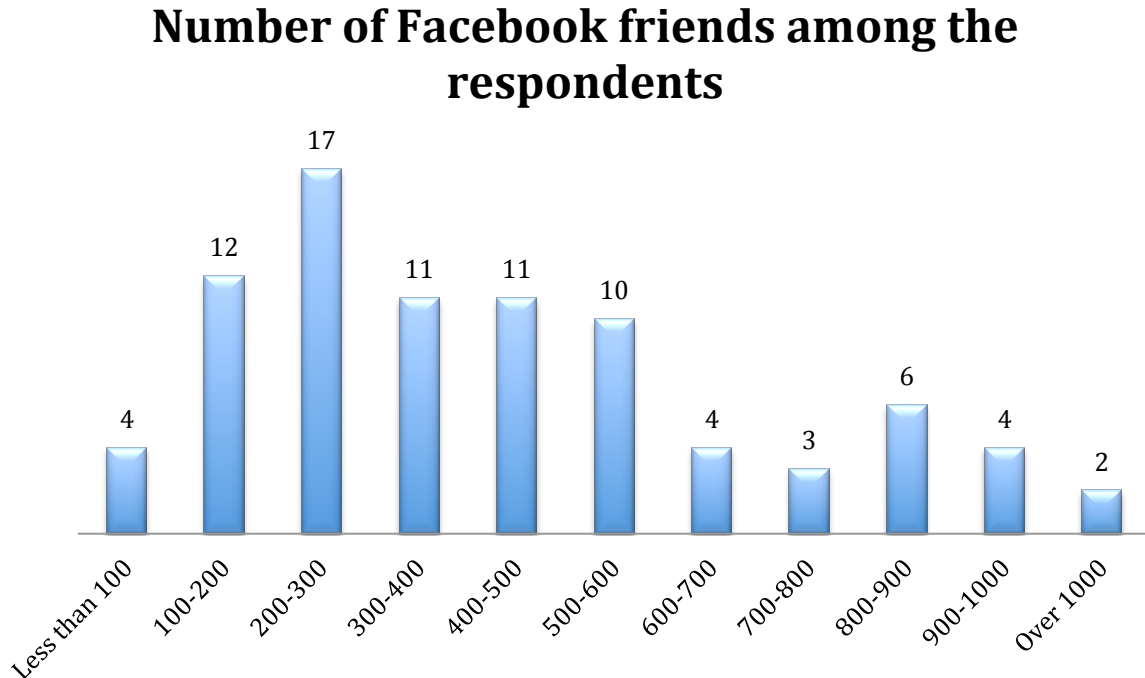


Figure 2. The number of Facebook friends among the survey respondents. The values over the bars indicate the number of respondents with a certain number of friends, binned at intervals of 100.

The largest group, consisting 20% of the respondents, had 200-300 Facebook friends. The second largest group (14% of respondents) had 100-200 Facebook friends. The next two groups with 300-400 and 400-500 Facebook friends both covered 13% of the respondents. Together, these four groups cover 60% of the whole share.

The survey also revealed that 4,8% of the respondents have been using Facebook for 1-5 years and the remaining 95,2% have been using Facebook for more than 5 years.

Of the respondents, about 64% were 25-34 years old - not a surprising result since the survey was shared among my Facebook friends and they mainly belong to this age group. The recent research conducted by Zephoria Inc. (2017) also indicates that when it comes to Facebook “age 25 to 34, at 29.7% of users, is the most common age demographic”. The rest of the survey respondents were divided into various age groups. A considerable part (25%) of the participants were 35-44 years old. Moreover, 1.2% of the respondents were under 16, and similarly, 1.2% of them belonged to the oldest group, that is, 55-64 years.

## **4.2 Facebook friends**

Since Facebook is considered as a social network service, the users need someone to be social with. Friends are an important aspect of Facebook: they are the audience that the users have selected for their actions. “Friending” someone on Facebook happens when one of the users sends a friend request to another user. The user receiving the request can then decide whether she wants to accept the request or not. Based on the survey results, it seems that Facebook is a place where individuals want to interact with people they already know rather than meeting someone new. In general, the respondents of the survey accepted friend requests from people they know and have met. In addition, 47,6% said that they accept friend requests from people that they know but have not met. Only 2,4% indicated that they accept friend requests even from people they do not know. Answers to this question were not particularly surprising because people usually tend to group with people they already know. Previous studies (e.g. Stenros et al., 2011; Cirucci, 2013; Boyd & Ellison, 2007) have correspondingly noted that Facebook is a place to stay in touch rather than making new connections.

The respondents who only accept requests from people they know and have met, described that they don't want to share their lives with complete strangers nor are they interested in seeing updates about strangers' lives in their own feed. Some also noted that by keeping their friends list quite small and restricted, they are able to post more freely because they don't need to think about the audience so much. In general, the number of friends that the users had seems not to be an important factor: the users that had less than 100 and the users that had over 1000 friends had similar policies when accepting friend requests or grouping people based on the content they want them to see.

The respondents who accept requests from someone they know, but have not met face-to-face, mostly referred to those people as work contacts or friends who they had met online, for example, while playing an online game. Moreover, these respondents had a strict policy of not accepting complete strangers, because they do not want to share their lives with people they don't know, feeling that there are many fake profiles for trolling or for gaining friends for advertising purposes. They, however, seemed to be using Facebook more as a networking tool than just a tool for keeping contact with their closest friends.

“I don't like adding people I don't know. In some cases you work with people who you haven't met and then it can be convenient to accept their friend request even though you haven't met them in person.” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

The respondents were asked to evaluate on a 1-5 scale, where 1 denotes "not at all" and 5 "very much", whether they manage their Facebook actions based on the target audience. Results are presented in Figure 3.

## 42. Do you manage your Facebook actions based on the audience they will get?

(84 vastausta)

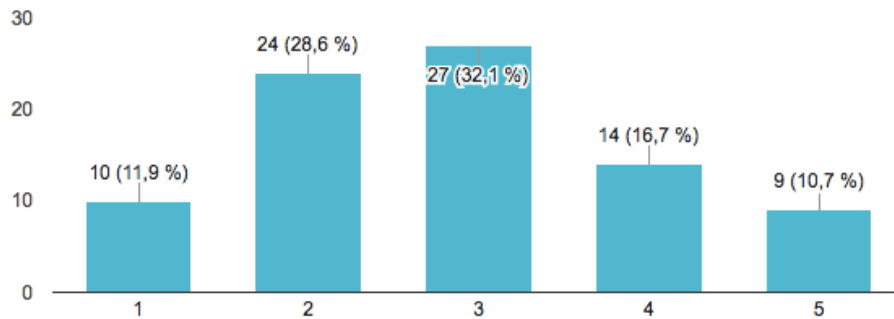


Figure 3. Management of Facebook actions based on the survey responses. The scale runs from 1 to 5 where 1 denotes "not at all" and 5 signifies "very much", and the percentages indicate the fraction of total number of respondents.

On a 1-5 scale, the average among all the answers was 2,86 and only 9 out of 84 respondents said that they manage their actions a lot. Facebook offers an option to create groups among the people on the users' friends list. There can, for example, be separate groups for best friends or acquaintances. It appeared that 59,5% of the respondents were unwilling to use this option to group their friends based on the content they want them to see, and the remaining 40,5% stated that they do use it. When analyzed further, approximately 24% from the ones that only add friends they have met face-to-face, and 32,5% of the ones that also accept friends they know but have not met, indicated that they do divide their friends to different groups.

There does not seem to be a huge difference how spontaneously Facebook users are posting different content. However, it seems that the ones that only have friends they also know face-to-face feel a slightly lesser need to limit posts based on different audiences. Then again, this could be due to the fact that they only post things that they don't mind anyone to see anyway.

The above findings suggest that people are usually posting things that everyone on their friends list can see. This leans towards the assumption that they are consciously thinking about how they perform on Facebook. Goffman (1959) describes how people sometimes intentionally behave in a certain way when presenting themselves among other people, because the group that they currently belong requires that kind of

behavior. By doing this, the person is searching for general approval among the group rather than trying to elicit any particular reactions. This could be identified within the survey respondents: they only post content that is discreet enough to be approved by an audience that is a selected mix of all the people they know.

Who you are friends with seems to be an important factor to other users of the service. When asked what are the things that the respondents look on their new Facebook friend's profile page, 38% indicated that they look at their friends list. Even though the study participants were not asked to explain their preferences, it is unlikely that a person would be willing to be friends with someone who has lots of friends from certain political groups, for example. It is easy to make assumptions about the person if she has a lot of friends from certain circles: whom you are friends with can also label yourself.

### **4.3 Posting**

Posting is one of the key communication methods on Facebook. The users can either post on their own Timeline or some other user's Timeline. When posting on your own Timeline the post is usually visible to the people who are on the friends list of that user. In addition, it may be visible to the friends of the people possibly tagged to that post. It is also possible to post publicly, making the post visible to all Facebook users regardless of whether they are friends with the person posting or not.

Over half of the respondents thought it is quite important to think beforehand what kind of responses their Facebook post is going to get, and 20% thought it is very important. About 45% of the respondents indicated that the maximization of attention from other Facebook users is considered quite a lot or very much. This suggests that how the users are perceived based on their Facebook posting is relatively important.

The users seem to be pretty perceptive about the things they post. About 43% out of 67 respondents indicated that they were successful when trying to draw maximum attention to something they posted, and 53,7% believed that they had succeeded in such efforts at least to some extent. In general, the respondents were mostly trying to gain attention for ordinary posts and pictures with no specific themes: they just want to get as much attention as possible. One respondent wrote:

“I always think about these things, whether it's a political rant, holiday photos or whatever.” (Survey respondent, age 35-44, from Finland)

The most common themes in pursuing maximum attention were related to political opinions or to promoting hobby or work-related activities and events. Posts related to these topics may label the users as enthusiasts or workaholics, and it can be argued that it is important for these users to be labeled as such. Interestingly, 20 out of 65 respondents had left political content unposted because they felt that Facebook would not be the right forum for the distribution of such issues. It seems to be equally important either to be clearly labeled as a certain kind of person or as not. One respondent wrote that:

“Anything really. I am really careful with my personal brand.” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

Even though people seem to be careful about the things they are posting, 57% of the respondents reported of an unexpected reaction to something that they posted. Moreover, about 37% out of the 48 respondents considered it as positive reaction, 24% as a negative reaction, and 39% had experienced both positive and negative reactions. When describing their feelings towards the unexpected reactions, the ones that said they got a negative reaction described mostly negative feelings: they felt angry, upset, sad, and annoyed. Then again, the ones that got positive reactions described positive feelings: they were happy, glad, proud, and flattered. Both types of reactions elicited surprised feelings among the respondents. The respondents were surprised that other users reacted so strongly about things that the survey respondents regarded as unimportant or uninteresting. One respondent said that she didn't expect to get so many likes for some ordinary meme picture she posted. Another respondent revealed always feeling surprised when people give strong negative reactions to something they thought was completely innocent.

#### **4.3.1 Sharing different content**

The respondents were asked to choose what types of content they usually share on their own timeline.

The given options were:

- Updates about your personal life
- Pictures of yourself or your friends
- Pictures of your family
- Travel or nature pictures
- Pet pictures
- Food pictures
- Pictures related to your hobbies or other things you're interested in
- Posts related to Facebook pages
- Posts related to Facebook games
- Facebook contests
- Facebook events
- News
- Politics
- Sports
- Culture related items (music, literature, art etc.)
- Human rights
- Environmental issues
- Memes or other funny pictures or videos
- Updates made by other Facebook users
- Other, what?



The findings are summarized in Figure 4:

### 37. Do you share on your Timeline: (84 vastausta)

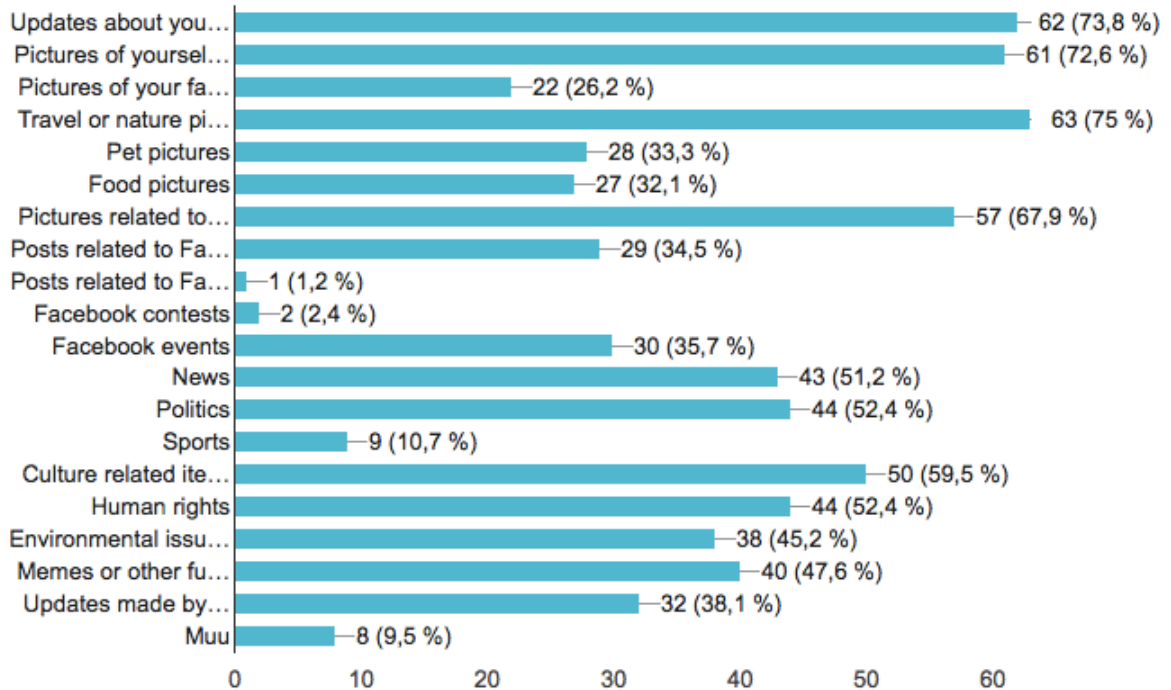


Figure 4. Some of the things people share on their Facebook timeline according to survey respondents.

As presented in Figure 4, the top three share categories were: travel or nature pictures (75%), updates about your personal life (73,8%), and pictures of yourself or your friends (72,6%). Based on these responses it seems that people are mostly sharing things that somehow relate to themselves and their life. However, one of the respondents in the “Other, what?” category wrote that they are sharing:

“Updates about my life but nothing too personal (like relationship status etc)” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

Too personal information was something that also the other respondents did not like to share on Facebook. 27 out of 65 respondents had left posts with too much personal information unposted. Many of the respondents had later removed something that they felt was too personal information, for example, details about their own depression. Some of the respondents felt that posts related to politics would be too personal

information to be revealed on Facebook, although politics was also something that 52,4% of all the respondents are sharing on their timeline.

The respondents seem to think that Facebook is a place to share personal content but only when it doesn't get too deep and reveal too much about them. 14 out of the 84 respondents wanted to keep their Facebook casual and neutral and did not want to post too serious content.

“I don't think Facebook is the right forum for serious content and I don't wish to engage in serious discussions on Facebook, so I only post light content.” (Survey respondent, age 35-44, from Finland)

Another respondent wrote:

“Facebook is my fun and friendly place, so I try not to get too political or too miserable.” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

The most common response to the question why people choose to share certain types of contents was, however, that the respondents themselves found that type of information interesting. 34 out of all the respondents indicated that they post things they like, and find interesting. It was found important that the other users, the people on the respondents' friends lists, would find the posted content interesting. 18 out of all the respondents described posting content that their Facebook friends would find interesting.

“Either I find them funny, important, or I think my friends would like them, or I just want to share things (like news) that are related to my life on my timeline.” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland.)

#### **4.3.2 Undesirable content**

The posts of other users seemed to affect the self-presentation tactics of an individual user. About 30% of the respondents thought that content posted by other users had influenced their own Facebook self-presentation relatively much, and the average among all users on a 1-5 scale was 2,93. Two study participants out of three revealed that someone else had posted something about them on Facebook that they removed, or would have wanted to remove, or asked the other user to remove. Then again, interestingly only 22,6% indicated that someone else had asked them to remove

something. The most common content that the users wanted to have removed was undesirable photos about themselves. This was also the most common content that other users had asked the respondents to remove. The respondents did not want to be seen as “unflattering, hideous or ugly”.

Childhood related things posted by parents were also not appreciated. Things that the study participants wanted to be removed included, for example:

“an ugly picture of me (from a friend), something embarrassing (from mom, of course)” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

Participants described cases, in which their parents had posted their childhood photos without their permission. Cases such as these are problematic, because they can give rise to digital stigma (Trottier 2014). People post on behalf of others, and children, whose parents are active users of social network services, are often present online before they even know how to use the Internet themselves (Trottier, 2014). The examples from the survey respondents show that parents can influence their children’s online presence also later in life, by posting things from their past that the users themselves do not want to present.

Based on the responses, fear of someone seeing an unflattering photo or a post seems not to be vain. When getting a new Facebook friend, 71,4% of the respondents noted that they look at their photos and 61,9% noted that they look at their wall posts. In order to only be seen as they want to be seen, Facebook users are forced to quite carefully monitor their own posts, and things other post about them.

Alcohol and being drunk were issues that the respondents were sensitive about. Pictures where they were present with alcohol, or clearly drunk were something that they wanted to be removed, and what other users had asked them to remove. In addition, 5 out of 48 respondents said that they had removed posts that they had made when they were drunk. Other reoccurring theme on posts that people had removed, or thought about removing were posts made several years ago. The respondents felt that they were not the same persons anymore, or they felt embarrassed about how they had behaved when they were younger. One of the respondents wrote that she had deleted:

“different things I wrote when I was young and careless and didn't think that they mattered later on in life” (Survey respondent, age 16-24, from Finland)

Trottier (2014) also talks about this matter in his book. Facebook was originally made for college students to keep in touch with each other. Even though this is not the case anymore, students are still one of the largest groups using the service. Students are often known for partying and behaving irresponsibly, and these things are often documented to social network services like Facebook. This kind of information can cause trouble later in life, for example, when applying for a job. (Trottier, 2014) It is no wonder that the respondents of the survey felt the need to remove posts from their earlier years.

#### **4.4 Tagging**

Tagging in Facebook is an action where the users mark themselves or other users to posts or photos. By tagging, the users are able to show that they were doing something with the other users, and also to get the attention of a specific user. All study participants indicated that someone else had sometimes tagged them to a post or a photo, and most of them had positive feelings about it. The respondents described feelings of happiness and pride, and how the tagging made them feel like they belonged to a group, and that someone was proud to be their friend. The issue of not looking at their best came up again: the respondents did not like to be tagged to photos that they thought they did not look good in. Few of the respondents said that other people usually tag them to something that they would not ever post themselves, and that is why they had mixed feelings about the tagging. One respondent wrote:

“It feels like I have very different kinds of potential audiences on FB, and therefore I get anxious on some posts my friends tag”. (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Sweden)

Some of the respondents said that they do not like the idea of tagging at all.

No less than 85,5% of the respondents had sometimes tagged someone in their own post or photo, while 15,5% had never behaved that way. The ones that never tag others to their posts don't do it because they do not want to post about other people. Another reason was that they feel that they will violate the privacy of others by tagging them to something they have not chosen to post by themselves. In contrast, those using the tagging option mainly felt that the people that they tag would like that information to be

shared. One of the main reasons for using the tagging is to notify the persons involved, and share the information with them and their friends.

Another common reason for tagging someone to their post or photo was that people wanted to show who they hang out with, and because they felt proud of their friends. One of the respondents wrote that:

“it’s good to show people that you have friends” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

Then again, one of the respondents who does not use the tagging option, described how the whole tagging process feels fake and that how it feels like people are only trying to present to others that they have some exclusive fun happening. Overall, the tagging process seems to cause mixed feelings among the Facebook users. Some feel proud that they can show that they have good time with their friends and some do not want to post about other people or other people posting about them.

#### **4.4.1 Timeline Review**

Facebook offers a Timeline Review option with what the users can review the tags made by other users and either allow them to their own Timeline or not. Of the respondents, approximately 57% use it and 43% did not use this functionality. One of the most common reasons for not using Timeline Review was that the respondents did not know that kind of option existed. This suggests that the users are not particularly concerned about their own privacy, or have never encountered any issues with tagging, since they have not looked through the Facebook settings where this option could have been found.

Interestingly, some of the people that previously indicated that they do not like to be tagged also responded that they do not use the Timeline Review option. When further asked why not, most of them described that they do not feel the need to. This is a strange contradiction, since earlier they stated that they do not like to be tagged and feel that it could be a violation of privacy, but then again are willing to take the risk that someone tags them to something undesirable without their consent. Not feeling the need to review the tags beforehand was overall one of the main reasons why the respondents

chose not to use the Timeline Review option. The respondents said that they trust their friends to not to tag them to anything that they do not want to, and that they can always remove the undesirable tag later. Of the respondents, approximately 36% had sometimes removed a tag that they had already allowed on their Timeline. Even though they do not use the Timeline Review option, the users still want to have control on the information about them that is visible to all their friends.

One of the most common reasons for removing a tag was a breakup from a relationship. Seven out 28 respondents indicated that they had removed tags from posts and photos where they were present with their ex-partners. Another common reason was not wanting old photos to show up anymore. The launch of Timeline in 2011 suddenly made all the posts ever made on Facebook visible again, and forced the users to review their old actions. One respondent wrote:

“Times have changed, social media has changed. Old partying photos were never meant to be visible for potential employers etc.” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

#### **4.4.2 Location tagging**

One aspect of the tagging process in Facebook is the location tagging option. This means that the users can add a so-called geo tag to their post that places them to some certain location. Location tagging is commonly used during trips to another country. About 29% of the respondents never use location tagging, while about 71% use it at least occasionally.

13 out of the 24 respondents who do not use location tagging indicated that they don't do it because of security reasons. The respondents appreciated their privacy, and also did not want to broadcast online that their home is free for burglars to enter. The other reason for not using location tagging was that the respondents did not felt it was important.

“From that someone would know I'm not at home right now. I also don't feel like I would need to share that info.” (Survey respondent, age 25-34, from Finland)

The main reasons for using location tagging were that it is fun, and it is nice to show people where you are, and also to make sort of a travel diary. The respondents described how they want to impress their friends by showing where they travel. Location tagging was also used out of convenience: the respondents used it to notify their friends that they are around in case they want to meet up, and to let them know that they might not answer their messages because they are currently abroad.

## 4.5 Liking

In 2009, Facebook launched a new feature: the like button (Facebook, 2017). The idea of the like button is to give the users an easy way to show that they like something that the others have posted. The users did not need to leave a comment anymore; they could just press the like button to show that they had noticed and that they care. (Facebook, 2009) On February 2016, Facebook (2017) took the like button even further and introduced reactions: instead of just liking something the users are now able to show emotions like sadness or being angry just by pressing a button (see Figure 5). This offers the users even more options to react to other people's posts without leaving a verbal comment.

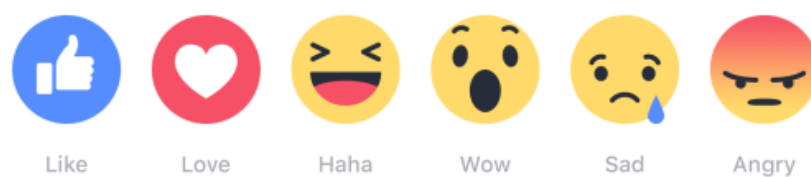


Figure 5. Facebook's new reaction buttons. (Facebook, 2017)

The respondents were asked if they like or react to posts made by other users. The results are shown in Figure 6.

### 35. Do you like or react to other users posts on Facebook? (84 vastausta)

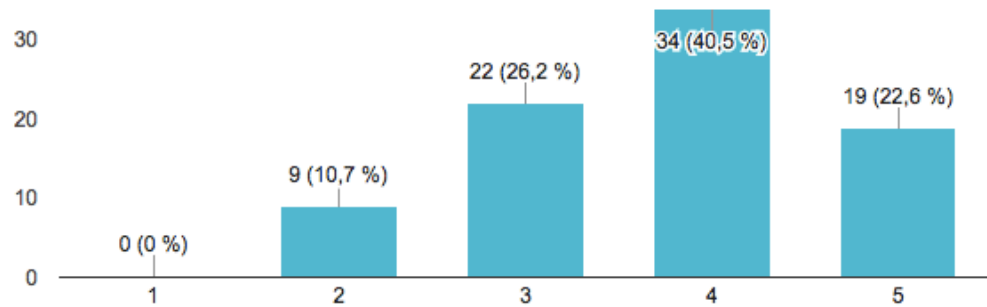


Figure 6. Amount of reactions to other users posts based on survey responses. The scale runs from 1 to 5 where 1 denotes "not at all" and 5 signifies "very much", and the percentages indicate the fraction of total number of respondents.

The average for all the responses was 3,75. The answers suggest that the reaction buttons are a common way to express one's feelings towards other people's posts on Facebook. All the respondents of this survey are using the reaction buttons at least sometimes.

According to Skågeby (2010), the use of the reactions on Facebook can be referred as a gift-giving process: giving and receiving likes is like giving and receiving gifts. Similarly as in the gift-giving process, people have different patterns when it comes to giving and receiving likes. Some people give gifts all the time and some people do it more rarely; similarly some people like everything they see on Facebook and some people rarely do it. The same thing applies also in receiving likes: some people receive more than others. Hong and associates (2017) argue that giving more likes to other people on Facebook is like giving more gifts to people: an attempt to form a positive image about themselves in front of others.

The results of this survey show that people are giving likes and other reactions as gifts pretty often, but they also give a thought before doing so. About 60% of the survey respondents chose not to like something because they thought it would be embarrassing or somehow make them look bad. The above findings suggest that even though pressing



the like button is seemingly easier than writing a comment, the use of it is also carefully thought because of the possibility of looking bad or embarrassing.

## 4.6 Self-evaluation of the Facebook performance

The users of the survey were asked to evaluate their own Facebook performance on a 1-5 scale, where 1 denotes not at all and 5 very much. More detailed results are shown on Figure 7.

### 40. Are you trying to create a particular presentation of yourself through your actions on Facebook?

(84 vastausta)

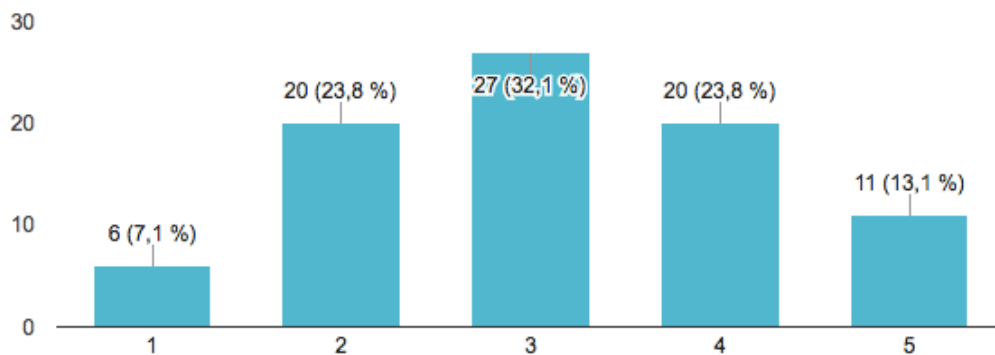


Figure 7. Survey respondents' evaluation regarding their own self-presentation process on a 1-5 scale, where 1 denotes "not at all" and 5 "very much". The percentages indicate the fraction of total number of respondents.

The average for the respondents own opinion on if they are trying present themselves on a particular way on Facebook was 3,12. This indicates that the respondents are willing to admit that they are at least somewhat trying to be seen as a certain type of person through their Facebook actions.

It seems that, on one hand, it is relatively important to the Facebook users how they are seen through their Facebook actions. On the other hand, the average for the question if

the users spend time thinking what other people think of them based on their Facebook performance was only 2,59, suggesting that the study respondents were fairly indifferent of such evaluations. About 51% of the respondents regularly consider the possible effects of their Facebook actions and 21% do it all time.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

The objectives of this thesis were to study the self-presentation habits of Facebook users, and to find out how conscious of these habits the users are. In addition, the study aimed to assess if the other users are somehow influencing the self-presentation process of an individual user.

To attain these objectives, the following research questions were posed:

1. Can self-presentation on Facebook be considered a conscious action?
2. In which ways do people present themselves to others on Facebook?
3. Do other Facebook users somehow influence the self-presentation process of an individual user?

This chapter discusses the results of the survey. Furthermore, the whole research process is reflected upon, and the need for possible future research is indicated.

### **5.1 Conscious self-presentation**

The self-presentation process of the Facebook users seems to be quite controlled. The users are careful when communicating on Facebook and they seem to put quite a lot of thought into their actions. They consider beforehand how other Facebook users would react to their actions. They want to be personal but not too personal: they want to share their life but they also want to keep things not too serious. They are also rather careful about their own privacy and do not want to be friends with anyone who asks.

Most of the actions performed by the respondents were done on purpose. The answers seldom indicated any hesitation while performing on Facebook: the respondents had clear ideas of the actions they want and do not want to execute on Facebook. Stenros and associates (2011) described Facebook as a place to construct a public face: something that everyone can see. The responses from this study also indicated that the respondents were trying to keep their performance in a way that anyone of their Facebook friends could see it. Based on these observations, as a response to the first

research question, self-presentation on Facebook can be considered as a conscious action.

## **5.2 Presenting oneself to others on Facebook**

In addition to consciously controlling their Facebook actions, the respondents of the survey seemed to put quite much thought into how they present themselves to others on Facebook. They admitted that they at least somewhat try to present themselves in a certain manner. As Goffman (1959) described, people tend to idealize their self-presentation. This could also be seen on the survey responses. The respondents did not want to look bad in anyway: no ugly pictures were allowed and the risks of somehow looking embarrassing were minimized and undesirable content was removed. They also described how they tend to leave things out because they do not want to be associated with certain things.

As a response of the second research question, based on the responses of the survey, it can be indicated that it is relatively important to present oneself in a positive light on Facebook. However, unlike Cirucci (2013) described, the respondents do not try to be “heroes” and become celebrities but rather keep up a pleasant image about themselves.

## **5.3 The influence of other Facebook users**

Based on the results of this study, the effect of other users is clear, and both positive and negative aspects were found. Some of the respondents described how they like to be tagged to another users’ posts, and some indicated that they do not like it at all. On one hand, the posts made by other users were not appreciated if they presented the affected user in an undesirable way. On the other hand, the posts made by other users also made the respondents to feel happy and a sense of belonging to a group.

Even though the users could control their own actions, they could not always predict the actions and reactions of other users. The elements of surprise were found in many contexts. The users were positively surprised about gaining attention to something they

thought was completely mundane but also negatively surprised about mean reactions to something they thought was completely neutral.

Other Facebook users were also perceived as an audience, and the respondents paid more attention to the content they post depending on who the recipients are. Friend requests were also thoroughly thought before accepting them, implying that the respondents do not want to associate with complete strangers or certain individuals.

## **5.4 Reflections**

The results of this study were quite as I expected them to be, based on my personal Facebook use. The data gathered from the survey provided enough information to answer all the research questions and was also in line with the previous studies that were presented in Chapter 2. Goffman's (1959) ideas of self-presentation as an ongoing performance were met and as Stenros and associates (2011) pointed out: people are trying to "give a good face" while performing on Facebook.

This study suggests that self-presentation is a conscious action; something that has not been clearly indicated in previous studies. As a response to Thumim's (2012) claim, and to the general opinion from my thesis seminar that were both presented on Chapter 1, this study proved that the self-presentation in Facebook actually is thoroughly thought and not careless at all.

As pointed out by the respondents, the times have changed and the nature of social media has also changed. Facebook started out as a platform for college students to interact with each other, and has since gradually expanded as a platform for everyone to use. While the users can still select whom they want to be friends with and who sees their actions, the network has grown tremendously and people are much more connected than they were before. It is likely that information that was meant to be private or semi-private will indirectly and eventually become public through, for example, tagging and commenting.

The study provided insight on how the use of Facebook has changed; from being a cozy place to chat with your friends to simultaneously being a public job application. Due to

these changes, it is rather obvious that the users are being more careful how they present themselves – a key finding that this thesis was able to confirm.

The influence of other users was presented previously in a more negative manner by Trottier (2014). In comparison to Trottier's (2014) claims about identities being spoiled by other users, the respondents of this study indicated that their online identities were being strengthened by others. The novel discovery that actions of other users can lead to certain positive aspects in self-presentation is worth further study. Negative aspects are easy to point out, but the benefits of being friends with some specific individual may not be obvious.

Taking a critical look at my study, it is obvious that some of the items of the survey questionnaire could have been more specific in order to create a more detailed picture of the self-presentation processes. I asked the respondents to leave their e-mail address if they were willing to be contacted in order to answer some more detailed questions. In the end I, however, opted out of doing any additional questioning even though in some cases it could have been beneficial. For example, the empirical data could have been enriched by obtaining more detailed information about why people choose to look at certain things from another person's profile. So even though the test rounds were made, there could still have been some room for improvement.

Overall, I think this study managed to fulfill its objectives and gave valid answers to all research questions. However, since the age division of the respondents was quite limited after all, it could be interesting to conduct similar research to another age group and focus, for example, to the self-presentation habits of clearly older or younger users of Facebook. Furthermore, it could be interesting to conduct this study in a different country in order to compare how socio-cultural factors affect people's self-presentation habits on Facebook.

This study, as well as many of the previous ones, concentrates on the private profiles where the users are able to select who sees their actions. However, it is also possible to create a completely public profile that anyone can follow. The future research could possibly concentrate more on the public aspects of Facebook self-presentation and how it differs from the more private one.

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## APPENDIX 1: SURVEY FORM

# Presenting yourself in Facebook - Master's Thesis Questionnaire

I'm a student in the University of Tampere and I'm doing my Master's thesis about self-presentation habits of Facebook users. The answers gained from this questionnaire will be used as a research material for my thesis.

The questions are about Facebook use so you need to have an active Facebook account in order to answer this questionnaire. You might need some information from your Facebook while answering to this questionnaire, so I recommend that you open it as well.

It will take around 15 minutes to answer this questionnaire. All the answers are handled anonymously but if you are willing to answer some possible additional questions, you can leave your email address for it.

If you have any questions related to the whole questionnaire or to an individual question or you don't understand something, you can contact me via email: [rantasalo.terhi.i@student.uta.fi](mailto:rantasalo.terhi.i@student.uta.fi)

All the answers are highly appreciated. Thank you for your answer in advance!

- Terhi Rantasalo

\*Pakollinen

### Background information

1. Your age? \*

- ☐ Under 16
- ☐ 16-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ Over 65

2. Your location? \*

Valitse



3. How long have you been using Facebook? \*

- ☐ Less than a year
- ☐ 1-5 years
- ☐ More than five years

4. How many Facebook friends do you have? \*

Oma vastauksesi

5. Your email address (if you are willing to be contacted and possibly answer some additional questions)

Oma vastauksesi

## Posting

Including the things you post on your own timeline, some other user's timeline or when commenting someone else's post.

6. When posting on Facebook, do you think beforehand what kind of response you are going to get? \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

7. Have you ever thought about how to maximize the attention when posting something on Facebook? I.e. choosing the right words, timing or photo. \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

8. If yes, did it work the way you expected it to?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Sort of
- ☐ No

9. What kind of content it was?

Oma vastauksesi

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10. Have you ever posted something on Facebook that got a response that you didn't expect? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

11. If yes, was it a positive or a negative one?

☐ Negative

☐ Positive

☐ I've had both

12. How did you react / how did it make you feel?

Oma vastauksesi

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13. Have you ever left something unposted because you thought that Facebook as an audience wouldn't be the right place for that kind of content? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. If yes, what kind of content it was?

Oma vastauksesi

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15. Have you ever posted anything on Facebook that you have later regretted and removed or thought about removing? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

16. If yes, why? What kind of content it was?

Oma vastauksesi

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17. Has anyone else ever posted something about you on Facebook that you removed or would have wanted to remove / asked them to remove? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

18. If yes, why? What kind of content it was?

Oma vastauksesi

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19. Has anyone ever demanded you to remove something you've posted on Facebook? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

20. If yes, why? What kind of content it was?

Oma vastauksesi

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## Tagging

Tagging in general means the actions where you mark yourself to a post or a photo or someone else does it for you. Location tagging means the actions when you mark a location where your post or photo happened.

21. Has anyone ever tagged you in a post or photo on Facebook? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

22. If yes, how did it make you feel?

Oma vastauksesi

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23. Have you ever tagged someone in your post or photo on Facebook? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

24. Why or why not? \*

Oma vastauksesi

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25. Do you use the Timeline Review option? \*

Timeline Review is the option that allows you to view the posts that other people tag you to before letting them in your own Timeline.

☐ Yes

☐ No

26. Why or why not? \*

Oma vastauksesi

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27. Have you ever removed a tag that you've already allowed on your timeline? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

28. If yes, why?

Oma vastauksesi

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29. Do you use location tagging? I.e. if you're on a holiday in some other country. \*

☐ Yes

☐ Occasionally

☐ No

30. Why or why not? \*

Oma vastauksesi

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## Friends

31. If you receive a friend request on Facebook, do you usually accept it if it's from: \*

You can choose more than one option.

- ☐ Someone you know and have met
- ☐ Someone you know but haven't met
- ☐ Someone you don't know

32. Why or why not? \*

Oma vastauksesi

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33. When you get a new Facebook friend, what are the things you look on their profile? \*

You can choose more than one option.

- ☐ Nothing
- ☐ Photos
- ☐ Likes
- ☐ Friend list
- ☐ Wall posts
- ☐ Muu: \_\_\_\_\_

34. Do you group your Facebook friends based on the content you want them to see? I.e. restricted, close friends, acquaintances etc. \*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

## Liking and sharing

35. Do you like or react to other users posts on Facebook? \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

36. Have you ever not liked something because you thought it would be embarrassing or somehow make you look bad? \*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**37. Do you share on your Timeline: \***

You can choose more than one option.

- ☐ Updates about your personal life
- ☐ Pictures of yourself or your friends
- ☐ Pictures of your family
- ☐ Travel or nature pictures
- ☐ Pet pictures
- ☐ Food pictures
- ☐ Pictures related to your hobbies or other things you're interested in
- ☐ Posts related to Facebook pages
- ☐ Posts related to Facebook games
- ☐ Facebook contests
- ☐ Facebook events
- ☐ News
- ☐ Politics
- ☐ Sports
- ☐ Culture related items (music, literature, art etc.)
- ☐ Human rights
- ☐ Environmental issues
- ☐ Memes or other funny pictures or videos



42. Do you manage your Facebook actions based on the audience they will get? \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

43. Has the content published by other Facebook users ever influenced your own Facebook self-presentation? \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much